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ABSTRACT

This report presents the findings of a survey designed to gather information about the experiences and attitudes of students enrolled in developmental English courses at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC). The primary purpose of the study was to find out how satisfied students were with their experiences related to their English placement testing and course work in developmental English at NVCC during the fall 2000 semester. The study also sought information about the respondents' academic preparation prior to beginning the fall 2000 semester at NVCC. The respondents were students who did not return for the spring 2001 semester. They were asked to self-rate their pre-enrollment English skills and their study skills and to describe how they had performed in high school. Highlights include: (1) 85% of respondents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the college's recommendation that they take the English placement test; (2) 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the preparation material provided by the testing center gave them adequate information about the test; (3) 80% said that instructors adapted to their individual needs; and (4) 72% planned to return to NVCC. Many of the reasons given for withdrawal were personal, such as work schedule conflicts, lack of time to study, and lack of transportation. (Contains 25 tables.) (NB)

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NON-RETURNING DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH STUDENTS AT NVCC: FALL 2000

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Northern Virginia Community College

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OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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NON-RETURNING DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH STUDENTS AT NVCC: FALL 2000

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a telephone survey that was conducted to gather information about the experiences and attitudes of students enrolled in developmental English courses at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) in fall 2000. The respondents were students who did not return to NVCC for the spring 2001 term. The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at NVCC conducted the telephone surveys during the spring 2001 semester. The primary goals of the study were to find out what the respondents thought about the English placement testing process, how satisfied they were with their placement, and how beneficial they found the courses that they took in developmental English. Information was also obtained about their academic performance prior to enrollment, why they chose NVCC, and what their education goal had been at the time of enrollment. Finally, in addition to being asked whether they planned to return to NVCC, the respondents were asked about their opinion on mandatory testing and on mandatory placement for new students at NVCC.

The following is a summary of the study's key findings.

Satisfaction with the Testing Process

- A large majority of the respondents (85%) said that they agreed with the recommendation to take an English placement test.
- Eighty percent (80%) of the respondents thought that preparation material provided by the Testing Center was adequate, and nearly two-thirds of respondents said that they received adequate pre-test guidance and counseling.
- A large majority of respondents (84%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were generally comfortable about the test procedure.
- More than a fourth of the respondents (28%) said that they would have preferred taking a paper and pencil test rather than the computer-based test.
- Respondents were about evenly divided between those who found some areas of the test challenging and those who did not.
- Slightly more than two-thirds of the respondents, when asked their overall perception of the test, said that the test met their standards. Ten percent of the respondents said that the test was too easy, while 11% said that it was too hard.

Satisfaction with Placement

- Nearly all of the respondents said that they understood how the test report that they received after the test should be used and that they understood the prerequisites they needed for the English courses that they wanted to take.

- Slightly more than half of the respondents said that they had helpful counseling and/or advice after the English placement test.

- About two-thirds of the respondents stated that they were comfortable with the fact that the school placed them in a developmental English course.

- Twenty-seven percent of respondents felt that they were placed in a developmental English course that was too easy for them, while 18% said their developmental English course was too difficult.

Satisfaction with the Course and the Instructor

- Approximately two-thirds of respondents found the developmental English course in which they were placed useful. About a quarter of the respondents did not.

- The vast majority of respondents termed their instructors as effective or very effective.

- About three-fourths of the respondents felt that the instructor adapted to their individual needs in the developmental English course and that the instructor spent enough time with them both in and out of the classroom.

- Writing centers were the most frequently mentioned service used by those who took advantage of one or more of the College's support services.

- Eighty-eight percent of the respondents said that the class size in their developmental English course was comfortable.

Pre-Enrollment Attributes of Respondents

- On a scale of 0 – 10, 15% of the respondents rated their pre-enrollment English skills in the middle of the scale (5). More than three-fourths of the respondents rated their English skills as 6 or higher, while only a very small percentage (7%) rated their skills as 4 and under.

- Well over half of the respondents considered their study skills as good to excellent. However, slightly more than a quarter of the respondents considered their study skills as only fair or poor.

- About half of the answers respondents gave to describe their academic performance in high school were categorized as "Good."

Outcomes, Reasons for Enrolling, and Plans to Return

- Over half of the respondents to the survey (58%) finished the fall 2000 semester at NVCC. Of those respondents who withdrew, more of them withdrew around mid-semester time than in the first week or two of the semester.

- The largest proportion of respondents expressed their educational goal in terms of interest in a specific academic or occupational program offered by NVCC. Like the goals in some of the other categories, these goals appeared to be ones that would have required students to attend college for more than one semester.

- Many more respondents indicated that their motivation for choosing NVCC was due to personal interest or their parents than because of their employer or job.

- Most respondents said that there was nothing the school might have done to keep them enrolled for the spring term. Many explained that their reasons for not returning were not school related or related to any dissatisfaction with NVCC.

- Some respondents indicated that dissatisfaction with their developmental English experience contributed to their not returning.

- A large majority (73%) of respondents indicated that they plan to return to NVCC, while 13% said that they would not. Fourteen percent were undecided.

Respondents' Suggestions for Changing Developmental English

- Over half of the respondents offered suggestions for changing developmental English.

- The suggestions for changes fell into two main groups: those having to do with testing and placement policies and those having to do with the developmental English course itself.

Respondents' Opinions on Mandatory Testing and on Mandatory Placement

- Seventy-nine percent of the respondents thought that all new students enrolling at NVCC should be required to take an English placement test. Just 17% said that they do not think new students should be required to take an English placement test.

- A much smaller proportion of the respondents (54%) thought that there should be mandatory placement for new students who take the English placement test.

NON-RETURNING DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH STUDENTS AT NVCC: FALL 2000

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a survey designed to gather information about the experiences and attitudes of students enrolled in developmental English courses at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) in fall 2000. The respondents were students who did not return for the spring 2001 semester. The survey, which was administered by the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), was conducted by telephone in the spring 2001 semester.

Research shows that not all underprepared students can be expected to succeed at the same rate. Clifford Adelman, a senior researcher at the U.S. Department of Education, has demonstrated an inverse relationship between the extent of remediation a student needs and the student's completion of a degree. Moreover, Adelman has shown that "when reading is at the core of the problem, the probability of success in college is lower."[1] Overall, however, underprepared students who enroll in developmental courses increase their chances of success in college.

Like other community colleges, NVCC offers developmental English courses to students whose placement testing indicates a need to build up their reading and writing skills before enrolling in college-level courses. Students who fail to earn a qualifying score on the English placement test administered by the College must enroll in one or more developmental English courses as prerequisites for enrollment in some college-level courses, including English. Students whose test scores fall below the qualifying mark on the English placement test are advised as to which of the six different developmental English courses offered by NVCC they should complete to better prepare themselves for success in college-level courses.

The primary purpose of the study was to find out how satisfied respondents were with their experiences related to their English placement testing and course work in developmental English at NVCC during the fall 2000 semester. A further purpose of the study was to determine respondents' attitudes toward testing and placement before and after their enrollment in developmental English courses. To those ends, participants in the survey were asked about:

- how comfortable they were with the testing and placement process,
- what they thought about the English placement test,
- what they thought about their placement in developmental English courses,
- their level of satisfaction with their developmental English courses,
- how effective they found their instructors, and
- whether or not they had completed the fall 2000 term at NVCC.

Besides finding out what respondents thought about their testing, placement, and course work in developmental English, the study also sought information about the respondents' academic preparation prior to beginning the fall 2000 semester at NVCC. Respondents were asked to

[1] Quoted in *College Remediation: What It Is, What It Costs, What's at Stake*, by Ronald Phipps. Washington, D.C.: The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998, p. 11.

self-rate their pre-enrollment English skills and their study skills and, in addition, to describe how they had performed academically in high school.

Respondents were also questioned about their educational goal at the beginning of the fall term, their motivations for choosing NVCC, whether NVCC might have done anything to help them continue, and whether they planned to return to NVCC.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to state their opinion of whether English testing and placement should be mandatory for new students at NVCC.

Students who had taken developmental English courses at each of NVCC's five campuses during fall 2000 and who had not returned for spring 2001 were randomly selected to answer the survey's combination of 28 closed and open-ended questions. The sample size varied because of changes in the number of students responding to each question. Since the responses to each question were analyzed separately, variations in the sample size did not affect the data results. Respondents were encouraged to offer comments during the course of the interview and at its conclusion. About 20% of the students who were enrolled in developmental English courses during fall 2000 and who did not return for spring 2001 participated in the survey.

The report is divided into seven sections:

- **Section 1** analyzes the survey results related to respondents' satisfaction with the English placement test and with testing procedures.
- **Section 2** summarizes the results related to how satisfied respondents were with their placement in developmental English courses.
- **Section 3** reports on what respondents thought about the developmental English courses that they took and how effective they found their instructors.
- **Section 4** provides a look at how respondents rated their pre-enrollment English skills, their study skills, and their academic preparation in high school.
- **Section 6** presents the ideas of respondents who made suggestions for changes in English testing and placement or in developmental English courses.
- **Section 7** summarizes respondents' views on mandatory testing and mandatory placement. A brief discussion of research related to mandatory testing and placement concludes the section.

Within each section of the report, questions are included in the analysis for the purpose of triggering thought or discussion. The questions are not meant to be considered the only ones that might be raised in considering the study's findings, nor is it suggested that these questions have never been previously considered by the College.

Section 1: Satisfaction with the Testing Process

Section 1 looks at the results of questions aimed at finding out what respondents thought about taking an English placement test, how satisfactory they found the procedures for taking the test, whether or not they received adequate guidance and advice before and after the test, and what they thought of the test itself.

Agreement with Taking the English Placement Test

First-time college students enrolling at NVCC are advised to take placement tests to determine their proficiency in English. Students' scores on the English placement test determine whether they will be required to complete a course or courses in developmental English as prerequisites to enrolling in many of the College's credit-bearing courses, including college-level English courses.

When respondents to the survey were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the College's recommendation to take an English placement test, the majority (85%) said that they agreed or strongly agreed with being advised to take the test (Table 1). Specifically, 27% of the respondents answered "Strongly agree." In contrast, only 6% of the respondents answered "Strongly disagree."

Table 1: Agreement with Taking the English Placement Test

Did You Agree with the Decision to Take the English Placement Test?	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	45	27.4
Agree	95	57.9
Disagree	15	9.2
Strongly disagree	9	5.5
Total	164	100.0

Adequacy of Test Preparation Material

Respondents were next asked whether the preparation material provided by the Testing Center prior to their taking the English Placement Test gave them adequate information about the test. Table 2 shows that 80% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the preparation material was adequate, while only 20% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was adequate.

In addition to indicating whether they agreed or disagreed that preparation material was adequate, some respondents volunteered that they knew nothing about the English placement test until they went to register. One respondent stated that she felt "blindsided" by lack of advance information about testing. Others noted that they were not aware that results of the test might mean placement in English classes where they would not earn college or transfer credit. A few respondents said that they might have taken the test more seriously if they had known the consequences, and several said that they were surprised to learn after taking the test that they could not re-take it for a year.

While the great majority of respondents thought that the preparation material was adequate, the finding that one in every five respondents did not agree suggests that procedures for making test information available to students may need to be reviewed. Some questions for review might include: What kind of information about the English placement test at NVCC is available to prospective students? Do most prospective students know they can find information and sample test items on NVCC's web site? How far in advance of the test should students obtain information?

Table 2: Adequacy of Preparation Material Provided by the Testing Center

Preparation Material Gave Adequate Information about the Test	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	39	23.3
Agree	94	56.3
Disagree	32	19.2
Strongly disagree	2	1.2
Total	167	100.0

Adequacy of Pre-Test Guidance and Counseling

When asked about the adequacy of pre-test guidance and counseling, nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) agreed or strongly agreed that they received adequate pre-test guidance and counseling. However, slightly more than a third of respondents (36%) said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that their pre-test guidance and counseling was adequate (Table 3).

Some respondents commented that they had received helpful advice about the test or a clear explanation of how the results would be used to help place them in an appropriate English course. Some respondents characterized the help they received as adequate but minimal, one saying that "some lady" simply told him, "Here's the test, there's the computer." A few respondents claimed that they received little or no guidance or counseling, such as the one who said that he thinks that English placement should be "more of a personal process rather than a computer telling students what to take."

Although nearly two-thirds of the respondents felt that pre-test guidance and counseling was adequate, the finding that one in three respondents did not consider it adequate suggests that not all students may have received the help they needed. Some questions for the College to review might include: Are students taking advantage of the information and help currently available to find out what they need to know prior to taking the placement test? If not, how can they be guided to do so? How can the College ensure that students receive the right information at the right time?

Table 3: Adequacy of Pre-Test Guidance and Counseling

Pre-Test Guidance and Counseling Was Adequate	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	31	19.2
Agree	72	44.4
Disagree	53	32.7
Strongly disagree	6	3.7
Total	162	100.0

Comfort with the Test Procedure

When asked about their degree of comfort with the test procedure, the majority of respondents (84%) said that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I was generally comfortable about the test procedure" (Table 4). Approximately 16% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they were comfortable with the test procedure.

Most respondents did not elaborate on their reasons for discomfort with the test procedure, but one reason given by a number of respondents was that they were "just not good test takers." Respondents giving this answer tended to bring up the same point in replying to other questions, often suggesting that a testing situation may not be a true measure of their abilities. A question raised by this finding is whether or not students who claim they are not good test takers should be encouraged to speak to a counselor *before* testing to find out if anything can be done to increase their chances for success.

Table 4: Comfortable with the Test Procedure

Generally Comfortable About the Test Procedure	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	39	23.8
Agree	99	60.4
Disagree	21	12.8
Strongly disagree	5	3.0
Total	164	100.0

Preference for Paper and Pencil vs. Computer-Based Test

Since the English placement test is generally administered on a computer, respondents were asked whether or not they would have preferred a paper and pencil test. More than a fourth of survey respondents (28%) expressed a preference for paper and pencil, answering "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" (Table 5). In contrast, the majority of respondents (72%) said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, sometimes adding that the computer was "no problem" or that they preferred the computer.

Of the more than one in four respondents who said that they would have preferred paper and pencil, many seemed to feel strongly on the issue, whereas students who did not indicate a preference for paper and pencil were more apt to say that they "didn't mind" the computer or

that doing it on the computer was "O.K." One respondent commented that while he didn't prefer paper and pencil, he found having to scroll up and down to complete some portions of the test "quite annoying." Another said that had she been working on paper, she might have caught some of her errors, but that working on the computer "made her go too fast." One respondent suggested that students should be given a chance to practice on the computer before taking the test.

How should NVCC respond to the finding that slightly more than one in four students expressed a preference for a paper and pencil test? Should students be given a choice between a paper and pencil vs. computer-adapted test before taking it? Are there drawbacks or increased costs associated with offering paper and pencil tests that must be considered before giving students a choice?

Table 5: Preference for Paper and Pencil Test

I Would Have Preferred a Paper and Pencil Test	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	31	19.1
Agree	15	9.3
Disagree	72	44.4
Strongly disagree	44	27.2
Total	162	100.0

Challenging Areas of the Test

When asked whether they found any areas of the English placement test particularly challenging, respondents were about evenly divided between those who did and those who did not. As shown in Table 6, about 46% indicated that they had found some areas of the test challenging, while approximately 50% of the respondents said they had not. Others said that they did not remember if any parts of the test were challenging.

Of the respondents who answered "Yes" to the question of whether or not they found any areas of the English placement test challenging, a small number of them identified which areas they found challenging. Grammar, writing, and reading were the areas mentioned most frequently by respondents. Another area mentioned as particularly challenging included a section where underlined sentences in paragraphs had to be corrected.

Some of the respondents' comments in response to this question indicated not so much difficulty with the content of the test as with using the computer for the test or confusion about what they were supposed to do. One respondent mentioned that she did not know whether she could ask questions once she began the test (so she didn't), and another noted that she had no chance to practice on the computer before testing, even though she asked to do so.

Table 6: Challenging Areas of the English Placement Test

Did You Find Any Areas of the Test Particularly Challenging?	Responses	
	#	%
Yes	86	46.0
No	92	50.0
Don't remember	8	4.0
Total	186	100.0

Overall Perception of the Test

In addition to being asked about any areas of the English placement test that they might have found particularly challenging, respondents were asked to indicate their overall perception of the test by choosing from the responses shown below in Table 7. The most frequently given response was that the test met their standards (68%). Much lower proportions of respondents thought that the test was either too easy or too hard. About the same percentage of respondents thought that the test was too easy (10%) as those who thought that it was too hard (11%). Eleven percent of the respondents either did not remember the test well enough to comment or didn't take the test.

Table 7: Perception of the English Placement Test

What Was Your Perception of the English Placement Test?	Responses	
	#	%
Too easy	15	10.1
Too hard	17	11.4
Met standards	101	67.8
Can't remember	7	4.7
Didn't take test	9	6.0
Total	149	100.0

Section 2: Satisfaction with Placement

Section 2 describes how comfortable participants were with their placement in developmental English courses and whether or not the courses were appropriate to their level.

Understanding of the Use of the Test Report

It is important that students who take the English placement test at NVCC understand their test results and how those results are used to make placement decisions. When asked, the majority of the respondents (91%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I understood how the test report should be used." As shown in Table 8, a total of 9% of the respondents indicated that they did not understand how the test report should be used.

Table 8: Understanding of the Use of the Test Report

I Understood How the Test Report Should Be Used	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	40	24.4
Agree	109	66.5
Disagree	13	7.9
Strongly disagree	2	1.2
Total	164	100.0

Understanding of Prerequisites for English Courses

The majority of respondents (92%) also indicated that they understood which developmental courses were prerequisites for the English courses that they wanted to take (Table 9). Less than 1% said that they "Strongly disagreed" with the statement regarding prerequisites, and another 8% said they disagreed.

Table 9: Understanding of Prerequisites

I Understood the Prerequisites Needed for English Courses	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	50	29.9
Agree	103	61.7
Disagree	13	7.8
Strongly disagree	1	0.6
Total	167	100.0

Helpfulness of Counseling after the Test

Students whose English placement test scores fall below the cutoff point for enrolling in college-level English courses must complete one or more developmental English courses before taking college-level English courses. After receiving their test scores, they are advised to confer with a counselor about what courses would be most appropriate for them. Respondents were asked about the helpfulness of the counseling that they received after taking the test.

Just over half of the survey respondents (54%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I had helpful counseling and/or advice after taking the English placement test." Thirteen percent said that they strongly agreed with the statement and 41% said that they agreed (Table 10). Of the 46% who disagreed with the statement, 10% answered "Strongly disagree."

Given that post-test counseling can be assumed to have played a role in students' understanding of their test report and which prerequisites they needed to qualify for college-level English courses, the finding that nearly half of the respondents did not consider their post-test counseling or advice helpful is puzzling. Is it possible that while they understood the information they received, many were disappointed or upset by their test results, causing them to feel a need for more support than is generally offered? Are College personnel trained to deal any differently with students who do not earn a qualifying score on the English placement test than with those who do?

Table 10: Helpfulness of Counseling After the Test

I Had Helpful Counseling and/or Advice After the Test	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	22	13.3
Agree	68	41.0
Disagree	59	35.5
Strongly disagree	17	10.2
Total	166	100.0

Comfort with Placement in Developmental English

Respondents to the survey were next asked whether they were comfortable with being placed in a developmental English course. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents answered affirmatively when asked, "After you were counseled about your test results, were you comfortable with the fact that the school placed you in a developmental English course?" (Table 11).

Table 11: Comfortable with Placement in Developmental English

Comfortable with Placement in Developmental English Course	Responses	
	#	%
Yes	124	65.2
No	48	25.3
Other	18	9.5
Total	190	100.0

Different reasons and varying degrees of acceptance were expressed by those who explained why they were comfortable with their placement.[2] Several respondents qualified their comments, indicating that they were satisfied in some but not all ways with the placement. For example, a few were comfortable with their placement, but not with the fact that they would not earn college credit for developmental English. As one put it in her response to the question: "Yes, until I discovered that there were no credits being offered for the course." Another respondent answered that he was disappointed that he didn't "make it closer to English 111" because he needed to be a full-time student to be eligible for health insurance on his parents' plan.

While a clear majority of respondents were comfortable with their placement, about a quarter of the respondents answered "No" when asked whether they were comfortable with being placed in developmental English.[3] A few students initially disliked placement in developmental English, but then changed their minds. One said, "In the beginning, I thought: Why do I have to take this? But the course was very good, good teacher." Another said that she was "mad at first," but knew she needed to learn.

Some of the concerns from the respondents who were not comfortable with their placement are ones that the College can address in its continuing efforts to ensure a high measure of quality in testing and placement. Policies guiding what recourse students have when they disagree with their placement might be reviewed, for example. Should students who think that the English placement test is not an accurate measure of their ability or who dislike their placement be given more opportunities for additional evaluation than are presently offered by NVCC?

Consideration might also be given to providing more information to students about the long term benefits of early remediation to help students accept it, even though they are anxious to get started on college courses. Because of widespread lack of public understanding of developmental education, students might also need to be reassured that a need for developmental work usually reflects on students' pre-college preparation, not on their intelligence.

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[2] Some of the responses indicating comfort with placement in developmental English courses were: "Yes, because I wanted to discover my weaknesses," "Yes, I knew I would do poorly because I have problems in English," and "Yes, because I thought it would help me."

[3] Some comments which respondents gave indicating their dislike for being placed in developmental English courses were: "No, beneath me," "No, I'm a better student," "No, I knew the material. I'm just not a good test taker," and "No, I felt like I should be in a higher English class."

Developmental English Course Too Easy

As further indication of how well their placement in developmental English worked out, respondents were asked to judge the developmental course in which they were placed in terms of difficulty and appropriateness. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "I was placed in an English course too easy for me." A total of 73% of the respondents indicated that they did not find their English course too easy. However, 27% of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" in responding to the question (Table 12).

Table 12: Placed in an English Course Too Easy for Me

Placed in an English Course Too Easy for Me	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	24	15.6
Agree	17	11.0
Disagree	98	63.7
Strongly disagree	15	9.7
Total	154	100.0

Developmental English Course Too Difficult

Respondents were next asked whether they agreed or disagreed that the developmental English course in which they were placed was too difficult. Fewer respondents found their developmental English classes too difficult than found them too easy. Whereas nearly 27% of the respondents stated that their developmental English course was too easy, Table 13 shows that only 18% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I was placed in an English course too difficult for me." Of those who responded to the question, the majority (82%) indicated that their developmental English course was not too difficult.

Table 13: Placed in an English Course Too Difficult for Me

Placed in an English Course Too Difficult for Me	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	7	4.7
Agree	19	12.9
Disagree	98	66.2
Strongly disagree	24	16.2
Total	148	100.0

Appropriateness of Placement

Respondents were asked about the appropriateness of English course placement. This question was asked to test the responses given in the previous two questions concerning the ease or difficulty of the respondent's developmental English course. As Table 14 shows, a large

majority of survey respondents indicated that their English course placement was appropriate, regardless of how they may have responded to the questions concerning the ease or difficulty of the course. Fifty-one percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I was placed in an English course that was appropriate for me," and another 24% strongly agreed with the statement. Twenty-five percent of the respondents disagreed that they were appropriately placed in English, of these 16% answered "Disagree," while 9% answered "Strongly disagree."

Table 14: Placed in an English Course Appropriate for Me

Placed in an English Course Appropriate for Me	Responses	
	#	%
Strongly agree	38	23.5
Agree	83	51.2
Disagree	26	16.0
Strongly disagree	15	9.3
Total	162	100.0

For purposes of comparison, and to gain perspective on these findings, one question that might be investigated is what percentage of students in college-level English classes find their classes too easy, too difficult, or appropriate?

Section 3: Satisfaction with the Course and the Instructor

In Section 3, respondents' level of satisfaction with the developmental English courses in which they enrolled and what they thought about their instructors' effectiveness are examined. In addition, their opinions on class size and what kind of support services they used are reported.

Usefulness of the Developmental English Course

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked if the developmental English course in which they were placed was useful to them. They were also asked to comment if they were dissatisfied by being placed in the developmental course. Roughly two-thirds of respondents indicated that they found the course useful and/or beneficial.[4] While a majority of respondents found their developmental English course useful, about a quarter of the respondents did not find their developmental course useful.[5]

Gains from Developmental English Courses

In addition to finding out how many respondents considered their developmental English course useful, a follow-up question was asked to find out what in particular the respondents thought they had gained from their developmental English courses. The respondents' answers to the open-ended question generally fell into two categories: those indicating that respondents gained something vs. those indicating that they gained little or nothing.

Many more respondents thought that that they had gained something from their developmental class than thought that they had not. When asked, "What do you think you got out of the developmental course?" the single most frequently mentioned gain was improvement in writing skills.[6] Another large number of responses indicated that respondents felt that they had gained better skills of various types such as in studying, learning, and comprehending. Respondents also answered that they had garnered other general skills from the developmental English courses such as in vocabulary and pronunciation, real world problem solving, and confidence building.

Some respondents answered that their developmental English class was a review of what they had learned earlier. They were about equally divided between those who thought the review was valuable and those who thought it was a waste of time and money. As one respondent in the latter group put it: "I paid a lot of money for what I already knew."

Respondents who indicated that they gained little or nothing from their developmental English courses most often simply replied "nothing" or "not much" when asked the question. Some of

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[4] Respondents who found the developmental English course to be useful made comments such as: "Yes, I needed the course to enhance my English skills," "Yes, it will help me do better," "Yes, beneficial even though I didn't think I needed it."

[5] A few respondents were dissatisfied with the course and gave comments such as: "The course was a review of early high school," "I already knew the material," and "Dissatisfied because once placed I thought the course way too easy."

[6] Some representative responses included: "Improved writing and editing skills," "Made me a better writer. Wrote a lot of essays," and "Better sense of revision strategies for informational essays."

the specific responses included, "Nothing. I already knew the material. I just don't test well," "Nothing except a waste of time," and "Not much. Did a lot of summarizing."

A recurring theme in respondents' answers was that developmental course content was a review of material they learned in high school and thus a waste of their time and money. Since developmental English courses are designed to help students whose academic background has not prepared them for college-level courses, respondents' perception that the developmental courses include some review of secondary-level material is accurate. The question that arises then is whether students who find the developmental course an *unneeded* review have been placed appropriately. And if not, why not? Moreover, if they find the developmental course a review of material they already know, why did they not earn a qualifying score on the English placement test?

Effectiveness of the Developmental English Instructor

Respondents were asked to give an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the instructor in the developmental English course that they took. In addition, they were also asked to rate the instructor's attention to individual needs and whether the instructor spent sufficient quality time with students.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked how effective they found the instructor of the developmental English class they took. An overwhelming majority of respondents termed their instructor as effective. Only a dozen or so respondents characterized their instructors as not being effective and a few more than that were equivocal in their responses, such as one respondent who said, "She was difficult. She was not lenient" or another who said that the instructor was "perfect" for her, but others did not feel comfortable in the class. A few gave mixed reviews, such as one who said the instructor was very good, "but at some points he left us working on our own instead of showing us how to make our writing better." Another said that the instructor "was not great at class presentation, but her written comments on papers were helpful." One respondent said that the teacher "was not the problem; it was the content level of the course. It was like remedial or something."

Most of the respondents who answered positively (over 90%), responded in general terms, saying their instructor was effective or very effective, with some respondents using expressions such as "great" or "excellent." "Awesome" and "a plus 10" were other superlatives used. Some respondents specified in what way(s) they felt the instructor was effective. Specific responses included, "Excellent instructor, kept us writing," and "Enthusiastic, very good attitude....made me want to be there."

Of the very much smaller proportion of respondents who did not find their instructors effective, many of them gave reasons for their negative appraisal. Some of the respondents stated that the instructor was new, the class wasn't taught very well, instructions were not clear, and that work was not checked.

Instructor's Adaptation to Individual Needs

Like the large proportion of respondents who felt that their instructors were effective, a large majority of respondents also felt that the instructor adapted to their individual needs in the developmental English course in which they enrolled (Table 15). When asked to respond "Yes" or "No" to the question, "Did you feel that the instructor adapted to your individual needs?" 80% of the respondents replied "Yes" while 20% said "No."

Table 15: Instructor's Adaptation to Individual Needs

Did the Instructor Adapt to Your Individual Needs?	Responses	
	#	%
Yes	134	80.2
No	33	19.8
Total	167	100.0

Quality Time with Instructor

Respondents were also asked if the instructor spent a satisfactory amount of time with them. When asked, "Did your instructor spend enough quality time with you inside and outside of your normal scheduled class period?" a majority of respondents (78%) answered "Yes" (Table 16). The remaining 22% indicated that the instructor did not spend an adequate amount of quality time with them.

Table 16: Quality Time with Instructor

Did the Instructor Spend Enough Time with You?	Responses	
	#	%
Yes	128	78.0
No	36	22.0
Total	164	100.0

Use of Support Services

Support services such as tutoring and Writing Centers are available to all students at each of NVCC's campuses. Respondents were asked about any support services that they used while enrolled in developmental English. In an open question, they were asked: "Did you take advantage of any NVCC student support services during enrollment? What services did you use? And, did you seek advice or tutoring?" More respondents indicated in their answers that they did not use any support services than did use support services. Approximately 20% of the respondents cited support services that they used. Respondents were not asked to explain why they did not make use of such services, but of the dozen or so who volunteered their reasons the most frequently given explanation was that they had no time because of long hours at work.

Writing Centers were the most frequently mentioned service used by those who did take advantage of one or more support services. Of the 39 respondents who said that they used any NVCC support service, 23 of them cited Writing Centers. Tutoring and library services were mentioned by about a dozen more of the respondents, while a few others mentioned counseling and other NVCC services. Some students mentioned that while they had not taken advantage of any NVCC support services, their instructors had informed the class about them, taken the class to visit one or more of them, or had brought support service staff members to the class to tell students about the services that are available.

Class Size

The majority of the respondents (88%) said that the class size in their developmental English course was comfortable (Table 17). Of those who found their class size too big, too small, or uncomfortable, the largest percentage (9%) indicated that the class was too big.

Table 17: Opinion of Class Size

What Did You Think of Your Class Size?	Responses	
	#	%
Class size was comfortable	150	88.2
Class size was too big	16	9.4
Class size was too small	2	1.2
Class size was uncomfortable	2	1.2
Total	170	100.0

Section 4: Pre-Enrollment Attributes

In order to gain an idea of their educational background prior to enrolling at NVCC, respondents were asked to rate their pre-enrollment English skills and to describe their study skills. In addition, they were asked about their academic performance in high school.

Self-Rating of Pre-Enrollment English Skills

When asked, "On a scale from 0 -10, how would you rate your English skills when you enrolled for the fall 2000 semester at NVCC?" the vast majority of respondents (93%) rated themselves 5 or higher (Table 18). More than three-fourths of respondents (78%) rated their English skills 6 or higher, with the largest percentage (27%) giving themselves an 8. A very small percentage of respondents (7%) rated their skills as 4 and under, while 15% rated their English skills as 5.

Assuming that respondents thought of 5 as the middle of the scale, most respondents considered their pre-enrollment English skills as falling in the middle or higher range. This finding suggests a possible reason some respondents were puzzled when they did not achieve a qualifying score on the English placement test or felt that the test was not an accurate measure of their abilities. One respondent, for example, rated his developmental English instructor highly but still questioned his placement because he thought his pre-enrollment skills would rate a 7 or 8 and because he was considered a good writer in high school. "Even at NVCC," he said, "they told me I should be a sports writer or something."

Table 18: Self-Rating of Pre-Enrollment English Skills

Self-Rating of Pre-Enrollment English Skills*	Responses	
	#	%
0	0	0.0
1	1	0.6
2	2	1.2
3	1	0.6
4	8	4.9
5	24	14.6
6	25	15.2
7	36	22.0
8	45	27.4
9	13	8.0
10	9	5.5
Total	164	100.0

*On a scale of 0 -10; 0=lowest; 10=highest

Self-Rating of Study Skills

In addition to rating their English skills, respondents were asked to describe their study skills. Asked to respond to the statement, "Overall, how are your study skills?" most respondents answered briefly, with "Good" being the most common response.

The responses to the question on study skills were grouped into four categories: Very Good, Good, Fair, and Poor. Approximately half of the respondents rated their study skills as "Good." Approximately a sixth of the respondents characterized their study skills as "Very good." However, slightly more than a quarter of the responses fell about equally into the categories of "Fair" and "Poor."

Some responses were categorized as "Other." For example, a few respondents described how they spent a lot of time studying, but to no avail. Others indicated that their study skills were O.K. only when they were challenged or interested. Several mentioned problems with concentration, saying that they were "easily distracted." Several respondents said that they had not had enough time to study while enrolled at NVCC because they were working full time.

Academic Performance in High School

In addition to being asked about their pre-enrollment English skills and their study skills, respondents were asked in an open-ended question about how they performed academically in high school. Respondents provided their own descriptions of their academic performance in high school. Their responses were grouped into the categories shown in Table 19.

The largest proportion of responses (49%) fell into the "Good" category. The next largest proportion of responses fell into the category of "Very Good" (25%). Together, the categories of "Good" and "Very Good" accounted for the majority of the responses (approximately 75%).

A much smaller proportion of responses fell into the categories of "Fair" and "Poor." Together, responses in those categories made up approximately 15% of the total.

Some respondents indicated that they had a learning disability. In some cases, students with a learning disability were successful during the fall 2000 semester, such as the respondent who completed his courses at NVCC, then transferred to a 4-year university. He said that he was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder in elementary school and knew that he needed to work harder than others to improve his skills. Another respondent who said that she had to cope with a learning disability had finished fall 2000 courses, but had been discouraged with her experiences, including those in developmental English. She plans to return to NVCC to "slowly achieve an Associate's degree." Other respondents with learning disabilities gave up. One said that he did not return because he "didn't like the college environment." He said that he "gave college a try" but knows he has a learning disability which prevented him from doing well in developmental English. Of those respondents who identified their learning disability, the one most often mentioned was attention deficit disorder.

A small number of responses were categorized as "Other." These responses indicated for example, that the respondents were average in most subjects, but low in English—or vice versa. Some respondents' performance had fluctuated from one year to the next in high school. A few respondents had dropped out of high school, not necessarily due to poor grades, and of those,

some had obtained General Educational Development (GED) high school equivalency certificates.

Table 19: Academic Performance in High School

Academic Performance in High School	Responses	
	#	%
Very good	47	25.4
Good	91	49.2
Fair	14	7.6
Poor	14	7.6
Other	19	10.2
Total	185	100.0

Comparing the respondents' ratings of their academic performance in high school to their ratings of their English skills shows that they tended to rate their English skills somewhat higher than their academic performance in high school. Overall, they tended to rate both their English skills and their academic performance higher than their study skills.

The finding that a majority of students considered their academic performance in high school as good or better than average raises the question of whether it should be a concern that they are placing into developmental English. Should an "average" student be able to earn a qualifying score on the English placement test at NVCC? Educators know that grades reflect varying standards from one school system to the next, hence the dependence on standardized testing, but students may be less aware of what that can mean. Do the school systems in NVCC's service area inform students that they must earn a qualifying score on the English placement test at NVCC in order to take college-level courses? How well does NVCC's standard for proficiency in English equate with the Virginia Standards of Learning in English? Not all of NVCC's developmental English students are recent high school graduates, but an OIR study revealed that on average, between 1995 and 1999 at NVCC, 93% of the first-time students enrolled in developmental English courses were 21 years of age and younger. A majority of these first-time students graduated from service area high schools.

Section 5: Outcomes, Reasons for Enrolling, and Plans to Return

More than half of the respondents to the survey finished the fall 2000 semester at NVCC. None of them, however, returned to NVCC for the spring semester, despite the fact that most respondents professed educational goals at the time of their enrollment that would have required attending college more than one semester. This section shows the number and percentage of respondents who completed the fall 2000 semester at NVCC vs. those who withdrew. Respondents' educational goals and their reasons for choosing NVCC are also examined, as well as their plans for returning to NVCC.

Completion and Withdrawal Rates

Over half (58%) of the non-returning students who enrolled in developmental English fall 2000 finished the semester at NVCC (Table 20).

Forty-two percent did not finish the fall 2000 semester. Thirty-four percent withdrew at or near midsemester time, while 8% withdrew earlier in the semester (in the first week or two).

Of the 33 respondents who stated whether they withdrew officially or unofficially, 20 said that they officially withdrew, while 13 said that they had not.

Table 20: Completion and Withdrawal Rates of Developmental English Students, Fall 2000

Did You Finish the Fall 2000 Semester? If Not, Did You Officially Withdraw? When?	Responses	
	#	%
Finished	96	57.8
Withdrew early (within 1 to 2 weeks)*	7	4.2
Withdrew early (within 1 to 2 weeks), officially	4	2.4
Withdrew early (within 1 to 2 weeks), unofficially	2	1.2
Withdrew near midsemester*	30	18.1
Withdrew near midsemester, officially	16	9.7
Withdrew near midsemester, unofficially	11	6.6
Total	166	100.0

* Students withdrew but did not elaborate as to whether they withdrew "officially" or "unofficially."

Pre-Enrollment Educational Goals

Respondents were asked in an open-ended question what their educational goal was when they enrolled at NVCC. Their various responses were grouped into five categories, which are shown in Table 21.

About 37% of the respondents expressed their goal in terms of an interest in a specific academic or occupational program offered at NVCC. Of these, the most frequently mentioned were computer and information science, business administration, health, and communications. Other fields of interest cited by respondents included journalism, photography, accounting, fire science, recreation and parks, psychology, automotive mechanics, and others. About 18% of

the respondents said that their educational goal was to transfer to a 4-year university, while another 16% said that they planned to earn an associate or higher degree. Together, these three groups accounted for more than two-thirds of the responses. While it cannot be said with certainty, it appears that respondents who gave answers in these categories might have been expected to attend college for more than one semester, yet none of them returned to NVCC for the spring 2001 semester. Another group, those who said they were in General Studies, might also have been expected to continue longer than one semester. They accounted for 9% of the responses.

Other respondents' answers suggested that it might have been less likely for them to continue at NVCC without interruption, such as those who were undecided on an educational goal (9%). Those who said that they enrolled for purposes of personal growth, to bolster their chances for advancement at work, to try out college, to take some classes they were interested in, or to keep up or sharpen up on their study or English skills might also have been less likely to continue without interruption. These responses, categorized as "Other," accounted for 12% of the responses.

Table 21: Pre-Enrollment Educational Goals

When You Enrolled at NVCC, What Was Your Educational Goal?	Responses	
	#	%
Academic or occupational program	68	36.8
Transfer to 4-year institution	33	17.8
Earn a degree	29	15.7
Complete General Studies courses	16	8.7
Undecided or no goal	17	9.1
Other	22	11.9
Total	185	100.0

Motivations for Choosing NVCC

In addition to finding out what goals respondents held when they initially enrolled at NVCC, the survey asked them to indicate which of the factors shown in Table 22 motivated them to choose NVCC. As the table shows, "Personal interest" tops the list of motivating factors, followed by responses that fell into the "Other" category. Responses in the "Other" category included answers such as location, affordability, program or course availability, scheduling options, and open admissions for GED recipients and students who had not pursued a college prep course in high school. A number of respondents indicated that their parents were a motivating factor in their choice of enrolling at NVCC, while just a few said that their employer or job was the reason they chose to enroll at NVCC.

Table 22: Motivations for Enrolling at NVCC

Motivations for Enrolling at NVCC*	#
Personal interest	91
Parents	31
Employer/job	9
Other	51
Total	182

*Multiple responses allowed

Could NVCC Have Helped You Continue?

Since respondents to the survey had failed to return to NVCC for the 2001 spring semester, they were asked, "What do you feel the school could have done to keep you enrolled at NVCC?" One hundred fifteen respondents said, "Nothing" or had no suggestions while 36 respondents indicated that they had had some issues that the College might have addressed. Of those, half cited dissatisfaction with their developmental English experience while the other half cited reasons not related to developmental English.

Many of the respondents who said that there was nothing the school might have done to keep them enrolled explained that their reasons for not returning were not school related or related to any dissatisfaction with NVCC, but instead had to do with their personal circumstances such as:

- needing to work or changes in work schedules or status,
- family responsibilities,
- lack of financial resources,
- lack of time to study,
- desire to "take a break" either from school or multiple commitments,
- lack of transportation,
- decision to move or to join the military,
- other personal reasons, including illness, travel, or uncertainty about goals.

Many of the respondents who said that there was nothing NVCC could have done to keep them enrolled spring 2001 were quick to add that they planned to return to NVCC in the future. Eight respondents reported that they had transferred to other colleges.

Of the respondents who indicated that NVCC might have done something to keep them enrolled, about half (19) suggested that their experience with developmental English testing, placement, and/or course work contributed to their decision not to return. These respondents also implied that if NVCC policies and or practices had been different, they might have continued. In answering this question and others, some respondents were explicit in pinpointing developmental English as their reason for dropping or not returning.

Asked the question, "What do you feel the school could have done to keep you enrolled at NVCC?" respondents tended to answer in terms of something with which they were dissatisfied, implying a need for NVCC to make a change. Others were more direct in suggesting what they think NVCC could have done or should do. The responses of those who offered suggestions

are listed below, categorized to show which of them were related to developmental English and which were not.

What NVCC Could Have Done: Suggestions Related to Developmental English

- Didn't like the testing process.
- Placement test forced me to drop.
- Did not like being placed in a developmental class.
- I didn't like developmental English. I wanted a higher level English course for transferable credit.
- I dropped because I didn't like the idea of being placed in a developmental English course; the course was a turnoff.
- Offer the developmental English course as a credited course.
- Gave me a chance for college credit, chance to take regular English class. Then, if I couldn't handle it, I would figure it out from there. Also, take more time to hear what I wanted to do. Also, could have given me a chance to take the English test again.
- English placement was deciding factor in not returning. Might have returned if I had been in the right class.
- They could have let me out of English 009.
- Give new students an orientation, so they know what's expected in testing.
- I had to pay out-of-state tuition and I felt that the developmental course was too expensive to take for non-credit purposes.
- Don't offer developmental courses. I dropped because the class was below my academic standards.
- Some classes don't transfer.
- Discouraged by taking developmental English or any English course.
- Eliminate developmental English.
- Given me a choice of taking English 111.
- Did not receive good advice from a counselor. Was told to register for English 111 before testing. Didn't qualify.
- It seemed hard being connected at community college. English 111 was too hard, that is why I dropped.
- Felt like high school all over again. Re-structure to meet adult comfort level.

What NVCC Could Have Done: Suggestions Not Related to Developmental English

Financial aid

- Had a hard time with financial aid.
- Counseled me and gave advice on financial aid.
- Processed my financial aid faster.
- Need financial aid.

Course availability

- Offer more night classes.
- Offer class I needed at Loudoun.
- Have photography courses at Loudoun and Manassas.
- Offer more courses on the Internet.
- Availability of classes at different times.
- No seats were available in the class I wanted spring semester.

Counseling

- I didn't know how to talk to a counselor.
- Provide counselors who are more understanding of individual situations and give more support.
- Counseled me on math and English.

Other

- Should have confronted my problems with instructor.
- Not force me to take microbiology. Dropped because of microbiology, not because of English.
- Somewhat more caring teachers might have helped.
- Not require students to have to e-mail assignments.

Plans to Return to NVCC

Nearly three out of four of the respondents plan to return to the College in the future (Table 23). When asked, "Do you plan to return to NVCC?" 72% of respondents answered "Yes" while 13% said "No." Fifteen percent of respondents were undecided about returning to NVCC.

Table 23: Plans to Return to NVCC

Do You Plan to Return to NVCC?	Responses	
	#	%
Yes	121	72.4
No	21	12.6
Undecided	25	15.0
Total	167	100.0

Section 6: Suggestions for Changing Developmental English

Over half of the respondents offered suggestions for changing developmental English when asked, "How do you think we could change developmental English to benefit you and future students at NVCC?" Just under half of the respondents said that they had no suggestions. Of those, many added comments indicating satisfaction with their experience with developmental English, offering comments such as, "No changes necessary," or "Just right." Others were more specific, such as one student who praised her instructor as someone who "loved English, was passionate about her subject, and made me want to do something." A few commented that there was nothing wrong with the class or the teacher—it was they who had failed.

The suggestions of respondents who had ideas for changes in developmental English fell mainly into two groups: (1) suggestions having to do with English testing and placement policies and procedures and (2) suggestions having to do with the developmental English course itself.

In the suggestions relating to policies and procedures, the questioning of how well testing placed students into the appropriate courses and, once again, the dislike of the fact that developmental classes do not carry college credit were themes that emerged. In suggestions relating to developmental courses, a desire for more individualized instruction is prominent, even though a large majority of respondents said the instructor adapted to their individual needs. Some dissatisfaction with the mixture of ability levels in developmental classes is evident in both categories.

To show the frequency of related ideas as well as the variety of the respondents' suggestions, all but a few of the responses are included in the following lists.

Respondents' Suggestions for Changing Procedures and Policies

- Give advance notice when testing students for placement.
- Change testing to accommodate working students.
- I'm not a good test taker. Maybe work on teaching testing techniques.
- Re-evaluate testing procedure.
- Re-evaluate the standards for the English placement tests to determine where students should be placed.
- Place students in the right courses.
- Enroll students who truly need it and screen those who should be in higher levels.
- Let students go to English 111 two weeks, or until they get their first grade(s). If they're doing O.K. in 111, then they should have a choice of whether or not to take English 009.
- Make it more clear what prerequisites are needed for English 111.
- Create a course that falls between developmental English and college English.
- Teacher should evaluate a student's academic performance within the first few classes to determine if a student has been wrongfully placed in a developmental class.
- Offer different levels of developmental English. Some students slow others down.
- Specialized classes to help people improve what they need to improve. Instructors should be trained to deal with specific needs for improvement.
- Classes on Saturday.
- More classes online.

- Be more clear about the structure of the class and credit offering.
- Give college credit for the course.
- Make it a graded course for [college] credit.
- Let students choose whether or not to take credit courses. Let them take the risk, even if test results show they need other courses, or give college credit.

Respondents' Suggestions for Changing Developmental English Courses

- Smaller class size, especially for foreign students.
- Cut the class size and then the students can get good grades.
- Two teachers might have helped—to answer individual questions.
- Keep the classes small. Some friends were sort of lost in larger classes.
- Smaller classes.
- More one-on-one; smaller class size.
- Offer tutors to students instead of putting them on a waiting list.
- The best thing would be if the English 009 and English 111 teachers would work closely with one another and get to know their students. Shouldn't the teachers be coordinated?
- Slower pace in teaching students who don't understand English.
- Make the class time longer and allow the instructors to spend more quality time (one-on-one) with the students.
- More detailed synopsis of what to expect during the entire semester instead of "surprises."
- Screen teachers and find people willing to meet individual needs, especially the needs of older students—ones who have been out of school for a while.
- Instructor should be confirmed to teach the class.
- Get some good teachers.
- If English 009 is required, it should be more than an extension of 111, not just more time in class. Should be additional instruction and individualized attention.
- More practice and communication inside the classroom.
- Make classes more kind. Creative expression should be encouraged.
- Work with students more.
- Add more quality class time. Make classes longer and encourage more group study and interaction.
- Categorize students in accordance with their skills; some students slow the class down.
- Separate slower students from students with greater English skills.
- English course was too fast paced.
- Encourage students to seek help when necessary and help to build their confidence.
- More grammar than writing.
- Teach a little more grammar.
- More time on editing, more feedback on papers...more time on fewer papers.
- Offer tours on campus and introduce computer labs and resources.
- Students should be required to spend time in reading/writing lab.
- More workshops would be helpful.
- Computer assistant and lab made available around the clock.
- Test more.
- Offer other grade options besides one test.

- Don't make one paper account for the majority of a class grade.
- All students can't adjust to internet classes. They should have the option within a reasonable amount of time to transfer over to classroom.

Section 7: Opinions on Mandatory Testing and Mandatory Placement

The final questions asked in the survey were designed to find out respondents' attitudes toward mandatory English testing and mandatory placement based upon test results. Section 7 presents analyses of the responses, which show that more respondents favored mandatory testing than favored mandatory placement. A brief discussion of research related to mandatory testing and placement concludes the section.

Opinions on Mandatory Testing

A majority (79%) of the respondents indicated that they think that all new students enrolling at NVCC should be required to take the English placement test (Table 24). Of the remaining respondents, 17% disagreed, saying that they do not think new students should be required to take an English placement test. Another 4% were undecided about mandatory testing for new students.

Respondents often explained their support for mandatory testing of new students on the grounds that students' proficiency in English should be evaluated so that they can be placed in appropriate courses. Additional comments offered in response to the survey's final question showed that respondents generally understood the purpose of testing. As one said in a final comment, "You want to be placed in the courses that are best for you, so testing is good." Another commented that "Kids who are overambitious might get into classes where they are doomed to fail. Testing protects them." In contrast, one respondent who opposed mandatory testing said that anyone who finishes high school should be allowed to enroll in college-level English courses. Another thought that anyone age 18 years or older should not have to be tested. Other opposition to testing came from respondents who felt that they could handle college-level course work and should be allowed to try. One respondent had passed two college English courses at another college and couldn't understand why he had to be tested.

Table 24: Opinions on Mandatory English Placement Testing

Should English Placement Testing Be Required of New Students at NVCC?	Responses	
	#	%
Yes	128	78.5
No	28	17.2
Undecided	7	4.3
Total	163	100.0

Opinions on Mandatory Placement

While a large majority of respondents agreed with a policy of mandatory English testing, not nearly as many agreed with mandatory placement in developmental English courses (Table 25). When asked, "Do you think that there should be mandatory placement for new students who take the English placement test?" just over half of the respondents (54%) said "Yes." Slightly over a third of respondents (37%) answered "No," while 9% of the respondents were undecided.

Comments made in the survey showed why some respondents supported mandatory testing, but not mandatory placement. Several respondents accepted testing but felt that a single test

should not determine placement; instead, they thought that students' high school records and/or other factors should be considered or that further or alternate evaluation for students who request it should be possible. A number of respondents disputed the accuracy of their test results, and consequently opposed mandatory placement. Some respondents accepted mandatory placement until they became convinced that the class in which they were placed was too easy or an unneeded review. Quite a few respondents who did not favor mandatory placement thought that students should have a choice and be allowed to take the risk of enrolling in college-level courses, regardless of test scores. One respondent said that NVCC should let students choose courses on their own because, "I felt like the developmental English course was a class for 'dummies.' It made me feel stupid to be in the class and was very insulting." Being required to take—and pay for—courses that do not carry college or transfer credit was another objection voiced by a number of respondents who opposed mandatory placement.

Table 25: Opinions on Mandatory Placement

Should There Be Mandatory Placement?	Responses	
	#	%
Yes	89	54.3
No	60	36.6
Undecided	15	9.1
Total	164	100.0

Mandatory testing and placement, along with issues such as what kind of credit should be given for developmental courses, have long been debated in developmental education circles. Policies and practices in developmental programs vary from one institution to another. In a study of community college policies released in 2000, the American Association for Community Colleges (AACC) found that "The majority (75 percent) of institutions requiring assessment for all students also require placement into remedial courses."[7] The study further found that "Seventy-six percent of the institutions awarded only institutional credit for remedial courses." An earlier study conducted in 1995 by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) of both 2- and 4-year public and private institutions reported similar findings. NCES found "some variation by institutional type, with about 80 percent of public 2-year institutions offering institutional credit compared with about half of private 4-year institutions." As for mandatory placement, NCES found that "about three-quarters of the institutions indicated that remedial courses were required for students needing remediation." NCES found that "public 2-year institutions required students to enroll in remedial courses less often than did public or private 4-year institutions."[8]

The question of mandatory placement is one of the thorniest because it tangles with the principle of open access. Richard Fonte, writing about a large suburban community college's "structured open access" policies for developmental education, says that the debate over mandatory testing and placement must always begin with "a discussion of the open access

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[7] Shults, Christopher. *Remedial Education: Practices and Policies in Community Colleges*. Research Brief. AACR-RB-00-2. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community Colleges, [2000]. Available: http://aacc.nche.edu.initiatives/issues/Remedial.pdf. Accessed 26 Feb. 2001.

[8] U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *Remedial Education at Higher Education Institutions in Fall 1995*. NCES Report 97-584. Washington, D.C.: 1996.

enrollment principle intrinsic to the mission of community colleges." He contrasts *laissez-faire* policies that allow unlimited access and "even a right to fail" with more structured policies that rely on a "caring but intrusive system of facilitating student achievement."[9] In the developmental education program he describes, reading instruction is seen as the key element in a program guided by fourteen "interventionist" policies. The goal, Fonte says, is always to increase student success without decreasing access.

There is abundant research in developmental education that addresses testing and placement policies. In a recent review of the literature in developmental education, Boylan and Saxon cite studies that say mandatory assessment, among many factors, is a characteristic of successful developmental education programs. Mandatory placement is also thought to contribute to student success, despite the fact that it appears to negatively impact retention. Because mandatory placement is thought to force more students into developmental education courses who might be less motivated, less competent, or less able to recognize that they need to build up their skills than students who place voluntarily, mandatory placement may increase attrition. This, say Boylan and Saxon, is not an argument against mandatory placement because research shows that while many of the weakest students will not succeed, "more will survive than if they had not received any remediation at all."[10]

Given the variations in how mandatory testing and placement policies are carried out in American postsecondary institutions—including who is tested, by what means, and to what extent test results restrict an individual's choices—a direction for further study at NVCC might be to investigate what research says are the best policies and practices in English testing and placement.

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[9] Fonte, Richard. "Structured Versus Laissez-Faire Open Access: Implementation of a Proactive Strategy." *New Directions for Community Colleges*. No. 100 (Winter 1997): 43-52.

[10] Boylan, Hunter R. and D. Patrick Saxon. *What Works in Remediation: Lessons from 30 Years of Research*. Prepared for the League for InNVCCtion in the Community College by the National Center for Developmental Education. [1999?] Available: http://www.ncde.appstate.edu/reserve20%reading/ what%20works.htm. Accessed 15 March 2001.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that some of the fall 2000 students placed in developmental English at NVCC disliked one or more aspects of their placement, some so much so that they withdrew or failed to re-enroll. Some of the strongest dissatisfaction seemed to center on respondents' feelings that, for different reasons, the English placement test might not have been an accurate measure of their abilities and thus they were mistakenly placed in developmental English. Strong dissatisfaction was also expressed by respondents who disliked being required to take courses for which they had to pay but would not earn college or transfer credit. Some respondents reported being insulted or disheartened by their placement in developmental English, possibly reflecting widespread public misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of developmental education.

The majority of respondents, however, were satisfied with the various aspects of their developmental English experience at NVCC, some welcoming the chance to build up their skills in English or otherwise indicating that they clearly understood the purposes of testing and placement. A large majority of respondents indicated that they benefited from their developmental English course and an even greater number of respondents said that their instructors were effective. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents completed the fall 2000 semester at NVCC.

Respondents' self-rating of their pre-enrollment English skills, study skills, and academic preparation showed that the majority of respondents considered themselves as falling in the middle or higher range in each area, perhaps accounting for the fact that some respondents questioned their placement in developmental English courses. A large proportion of the educational goals named by respondents appeared to have been ones that would have required students to continue their studies, yet none of the respondents returned to NVCC for the spring 2001 term. Nearly three-fourths of the respondents, however, said that they planned to return to NVCC in the future.

The examination of the experiences and attitudes of students enrolled in developmental English in fall 2000, and the gauging of their level of satisfaction with developmental English, will help the College determine whether changes or improvements are needed at NVCC to further promote successful outcomes in developmental English.

Following are some final questions that the College might consider in its continuing efforts to make English placement testing and developmental English courses as beneficial as possible to underprepared students. Like other questions included in the analysis, they are offered for the purpose of encouraging thought and discussion, with acknowledgment that they are neither the only questions that might be asked nor are they questions not previously considered by the College.

- In what ways might the English placement process be changed so that most students arrive at testing knowing what to expect, including the consequences of failing to earn a qualifying score on the English placement exam?

- Should students who think that the English placement test is not an accurate measure of their ability be given more opportunities for additional assessment than are presently offered by NVCC?

- Should the College make a greater effort to increase understanding among students of why college credit is not granted for developmental courses, a task which perhaps now falls mainly on individual counselors and instructors?

- How can the widespread misconceptions about developmental education be countered so that students do not feel stigmatized by placement in developmental education courses?

Answering questions like these and others will help NVCC continue to provide underprepared students not only access to college, but also the best possible chance to succeed in the program of their choice.

NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

COLLEGE MISSION AND GOALS

The mission of Northern Virginia Community College is to respond to the educational needs of its dynamic and diverse constituencies through an array of comprehensive programs and services that facilitate learning and workforce development in an environment of open access and through lifelong educational opportunities.

To achieve this mission, the following strategic goals for 2001-2003 are established:

Goal 1:
To provide a diverse, highly qualified, energetic, and dynamic faculty and staff dedicated to and enhancing student success.

Goal 2:
To develop and acquire adequate fiscal, capital, and community resources and to use them efficiently and effectively to provide the physical environment and tools necessary to assure student success.

Goal 3:
To provide an array of quality support services that enhance student success.

Goal 4:
To provide an instructional program that is accessible, affordable, and educationally sound that supports the needs of a diverse student body and enhances student success.